DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 447 209 TM 032 117

AUTHOR Miller-Whitehead, Marie
TITLE High Performing Alabama School Systems: What Do the Best Have in Common?
PUB DATE 2000-11-09
NOTE 13p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Achievement; Effective Schools Research; Elementary Secondary Education; *Institutional Characteristics; Report Cards; School District Wealth; *School Effectiveness
IDENTIFIERS *Alabama; Educational Indicators

ABSTRACT

The Alabama State Department of Education School System Report Card provides annual data for each of Alabama's city and county public school systems, including student achievement indicators on the Stanford Achievement Test, High School Exit exam, writing tests, ACT test, dropouts, ADA expenditures, free and reduced lunch, system revenues, and teacher professional certification. An examination of the data for the year 1999 showed that 13 of Alabama's public school systems received a grade of "A" from the State Department of Education in at least 3 categories and no grade of "F" in any of the categories for which the state assigns grades. This report seeks to identify commonalities of the 13 school systems that rated the highest on the State of Alabama's School System Report Card. Elected or appointed superintendent, gender of superintendent, system demographics, system size, location, and student teacher ratio were among the variables used in the comparison. All of the school systems identified were city school systems, rather than county systems. All were relatively small, and demographically, the schools ranged from 99% white to 59% white, with the average 79% white. Three systems had more than the state average of students entitled to free and reduced meals. All of the systems in this study had appointed school superintendents, and all but one were male. The school systems in this study all participated in a variety of special initiatives aimed at improving student achievement. Findings of the study point to the need for school systems to develop models that will be effective in communicating their successes to diverse consumers. This will ensure that the school improvement processes remains vibrant and responsive to changing marketplace demands. (Contains 2 figures, 2 tables, and 10 references.) (Author/SLD)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 447 209

High Performing Alabama School Systems:

What Do the Best Have in Common?

Marie Miller-Whitehead, Ph.D.

November 9, 2000

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

TM032117

Tennessee Valley Educators for Excellence
PO Box 682431
Franklin, TN 37068
TVEE.ORG

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Marie Miller-Whitehead
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
2B

High Performing Alabama School Systems: What Do the Best Have in Common?

Marie Miller-Whitehead

Abstract:
The Alabama State Department of Education School System Report Card provides annual data for each of Alabama's city and county public school systems, including student achievement indicators on the Stanford Achievement Test, High School exit exam, Writing tests, ACT test, dropouts, ADA expenditures, free and reduced lunch, system revenues, and teacher professional certification. An examination of the data for the year 1999 showed that 13 of Alabama's public school systems received a grade of "A" from the State Department of Education in at least 3 categories and no grade of "F" in any of the categories for which the state assigns grades. This report seeks to identify commonalities of the 13 school systems which rated among the highest on the State of Alabama's School System Report Card. Elected or appointed superintendent, gender of superintendent, system demographics, system size, location, and pupil teacher ratio were among the variables used in the comparison.

School accountability and school system achievement indicators receive a great deal of attention, not only from the general public eager to know that their children are receiving equitable educational opportunities, but also from federal, state and local government who must assure that each school system receives a fair share of resources. That said, it can be argued that some systems are more successful than others when it comes to the task of providing a free and appropriate public education for all students. It also remains true that the public perceives some school systems to be more "desirable" than others for one reason or another regardless of the educational opportunities provided by the system (Cornett & Gaines, 1997; *Overcoming barriers to school reform in the Southeast*, 1994).

However it is well to note that school systems receive awards and attention based on many factors, some of which have little to do with the educational opportunities they provide for their students. Location, employment opportunities for parents, and cost of living are only a few of the "quality of life" variables that may enter the equation for school systems that make a "best 50" or "nation's top 100" type of list. There is certainly no doubt that these are extremely important considerations. If a school district whose students achieved some of the highest test scores in the nation were located in the midst of the desert, with few available jobs for parents and substandard housing, how high would that district be rated by the popular press? Offspringmag.com, an online magazine on parenting, lists 2 Alabama school districts, Auburn City and Huntsville, in its "Top 100"districts in the United States, based on location, enrollment, academic performance, living costs, and expenditures per student. According to this publication's criteria, districts were chosen based on regional comparisons.

Almost all states have developed accountability systems which report data on school systems and student achievement in a consistent way so that educators, decisionmakers, and the public can compare "apples to apples and oranges to oranges" in a manner of speaking. Some of these accountability models, including Alabama's, include criteria which compare school system data with state, regional, and national data on the same measurement scale.

The majority of states currently have in place statewide accountability legislation. According to a 1997 report by the Council of Chief State School Officers forty-six states require that students take at least one statewide achievement test and fifty-two state education agencies have mandated at least one accountability area for each of their school systems. A 1997 study of the Alabama State Report Card sought to determine if the reported indices provided sufficiently comprehensive indicators to inform decisionmaking (Mathews & Hackett, 1997). According to this study the indicators on the State Report Card provided macro level information but were not sufficient to make recommendations or decisions about the quality of teaching and learning within school systems across the state of Alabama.

Accordingly, and to augment the indicators mandated by the Alabama State Department of Education, some schools and school systems have designed and implemented accountability models which they feel will provide their communities,

administrators, teachers, and students with more comprehensive information for decisionmaking. One model being piloted for several schools and school systems by researchers at the University of Alabama at Birmingham includes over 50 variables (micro level data)that provide a detailed picture of school, students, faculty, and community involvement. It is designed to more accurately describe the educational inputs, processes, and outcomes of a school than it is possible to do within the broader framework of the state model (McLean, Snyder, & Lawrence, 1998). It is also designed to allow system administrators to plan for proposed changes using "what if" scenarios.

Ideally, school districts should be able to show acceptable levels of achievement on the state indicators regardless of such demographic variables as poverty and ethnicity. It is of interest to examine these statewide reports to look for commonalities that may exist for school systems which seem to excel by receiving high marks in several of the reported areas. Although all educators are aware of the disparities that exist due to poverty, it still remains for educational researchers to account for all variability in student achievement. External factors such as family background and community resources play a key role in how well schools and students will do, and the number of hours which students spend in school is still small compared to the number of hours they spend in other activities. So it is a challenge for educators to develop criteria which they feel to be most indicative of school system achievement, taking into consideration the diversity of school districts across the state, the range of resources with which they have to work, and the needs of the communities in which the school systems function. However, the "macro level" data for each district provided by the state report card reveals some interesting commonalities for school systems which received grades of "A" in several areas but did not receive any "F" grades.

Table 2 shows the categories contained on the 1999 Alabama Department of Education Report Card for each school system across the state and the letter grades which the state has determined to correspond to percentile rankings on the Stanford Achievement Test administered to students in grades 3 through 11. The Alabama State Department of Education has also determined a formula which assigns a letter grade to each system for ACT performance, for dropouts, and for certain financial indicators when compared to state, regional, and national averages. An examination of the 1999 system reports for each of the Alabama public school systems revealed that many had received a grade of "D" or "F" in at least one category, most commonly on the Writing Assessment. This finding is consistent with that of a 1997 evaluation of the Alabama Direct Writing Assessment program which found that " the majority of grade 5 and grade 7 students did not write at acceptable levels" (McLean, Snyder, Abbott, Reid, Ernest, & Heath, 1997). All the public school system reports may be accessed on the web site of the Alabama State Department of Education. For the purposes of this study, an arbitrary decision was made to identify systems which had received "A" grades but had not received grades of "F" on any of the indicators on the Alabama School System Report Card. A total of 13 of Alabama's public systems were subsequently identified that had earned an "A" rating in at least 3 of the graded categories and no grade of "F" in any of the categories. These

systems are listed in Table 1 along with the categories in which they received ratings of "A". Mountain Brook City Schools and Vestavia Hills City Schools, both located in suburban Birmingham, received the most A ratings. All of the systems which received at least 3 grades of A were city school systems. Figure 1 shows a simplified model with observed and latent variables and Figure 2 shows the location of the systems within the state of Alabama. Observed input variables are system size (number of students enrolled), number of schools, county per capita income, student meal status, ethnicity, and superintendent selection. Output variable is number of areas receiving "A" on the State Report Card.

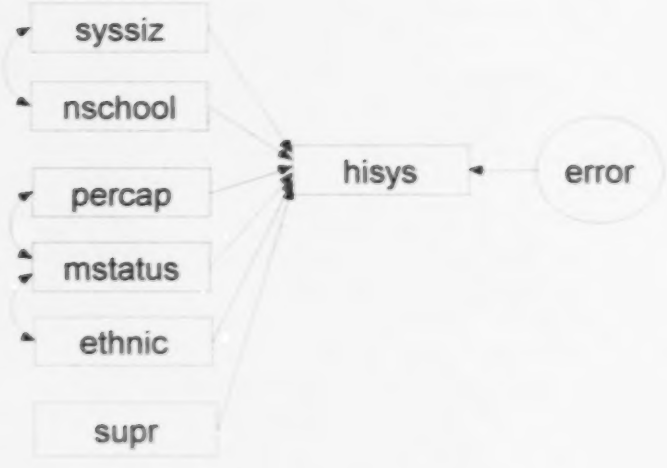

Figure 1
Simplified path model

Table 1

1999 Alabama State System Report Card Achievement Indicator Areas								
	2	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**10**	**11**	**15**
Athens City	A-		A/12				A-/S	A
Auburn City	A-		A-		A-	A-/S		
Enterprise City	A-		A-					A
Florence City			A-/12				A-/S	A
Hartselle City	A		A-					A
Homewood City	A	A-	A-			A-/S	A/S	A
Hoover City	A		A-			A		
Jasper City	A	A-	A-	A/P				A
Mountain Brook	A	A	A	A	A	A	A/S	A
Muscle Shoals	A		A-/12					A
Sheffield City		A-	A-/12				A/S	A
Tuscumbia City			A			A-/N		A
Vestavia Hills	A		A		A-	A		A

NOTE: Numbered categories correspond to those listed on Table 2

Findings

Of the 13 systems which were examined in this study, 10 received grades of "A" for student performance on the Stanford Achievement Test Average Battery, all 13 received "A" for percent of students passing the Alabama High School Exit Exam, and 11 received a grade of "A" for Mills Equivalent. Only 2 of the 13 systems in this study received "A" for Writing tests, Jasper City and Mountain Brook City (McLean et al., 1997; Jerry & Ballator, 1999). Three of the 13 systems received "A" for ACT test scores, Auburn, Mountain Brook, and Vestavia Hills. Five of the 13 systems received a grade of "A" for ADA expenditures, Athens City, Homewood, Florence City, Mountain Brook, and Sheffield City. Auburn, Homewood, Hoover, Mountain Brook, Tuscumbia City, and Vestavia Hills received "A" ratings for having low percentages of dropouts compared to state and national averages.

Discussion

There were multiple research questions which this study sought to answer:

1. Did the school systems identified in the study represent a cross section of Alabama school systems?
2. Were their demographics representative of the state of Alabama as a whole? Were any predominately white or predominately minority?
3. Were they "wealthy" districts, or did they serve large numbers of students eligible for school lunch programs?
4. What kinds of superintendents did these schools have? Elected or appointed? Male or female?
5. Did they participate in any special programs or initiatives, such as reduced class size?

1. Of the school systems that were identified in the study, 3 were Colbert County systems and 4 were Jefferson County systems (suburban Birmingham). All were city school systems, none were county systems. All the school systems were relatively small with an average of 7 schools serving an enrollment of nearly 4,000 students.
2. Demographically, the systems ranged from 99% white to 59% white with the average 79% white. The state of Alabama is approximately 73% white, so the systems were ethnically diverse although none of the systems was predominately nonwhite. Three systems had more than the state average of students entitled to free and reduced meals. Sheffield had the highest % of students on free and reduced meals, 63%, the state average for Alabama schools is 40% (2000 State Report Card).
3. The average county per capita income for the school systems in this study was $21,161. However, because these were all city systems the per capita income by

census sector location of the city system might be higher or lower than the county average. The median household income for the state of Alabama in 1995 was $27,357.

4. City school systems in the state of Alabama customarily appoint their school superintendents while county systems elect superintendents. All the school systems in this study were city systems with appointed school superintendents, all but one were male.
5. The school systems in this study all participated in a variety of special initiatives aimed at improving student achievement. Systems in suburban Birmingham, north Alabama, and Auburn are in close proximity to large state universities, community colleges, and private universities that can provide a variety of supplemental resources and facilities for research on educational improvement. Several systems have lower than state-mandated pupil teacher ratios, and one is dedicated to having teacher pay be in the top 10% for the state of Alabama.

As discussed in the introduction to this study there are many variables that determine public perception of school quality. What is deemed to be desirable for some students and their families might not be so for others. City school systems often have resources within walking distance for most of their students and may receive additional support from city government and agencies. County systems, by definition, generally encompass a larger geographical area with accompanying dispersion of system resources. Additionally, smaller city school systems may be more homogeneous and need to provide fewer special services than large city or county systems spread over many square miles with the necessity of providing services for very diverse populations of students. For example, systems that wish to reduce school dropouts or to increase student school completion rates may be more successful if they can focus their efforts on one or two dropout or school completion models aimed at specific prevention programs. Very large city and county systems which serve LEP, majority minority, majority high poverty, and mobile student populations face challenges that make direct comparisons difficult. Also, it is well to keep in mind that there are top rated schools within the larger city and county systems that were not identified in this study. Alabama has several Blue Ribbon schools and International Baccalaureate award-winning schools, for example, which are within school systems not included in this analysis (http://www.tvee.org/awardschools.htm).

The findings of this study point to the need for school systems to develop models that will be effective in communicating their successes to diverse consumers: parents, students, community leaders, higher education, and outside business and industry seeking desirable locations for expansion or relocation. This will assure that the school improvement process remains vibrant and responsive to changing marketplace demands for student graduates. Counties that seek to attract business and industry requiring highly skilled workers with college degrees may find this information useful for planning initiatives to improve student achievement, school attendance, and school completion rates.

Table 2
State of Alabama System Report Card Indicators
There are 16 areas included on the Alabama State Report Card. An * indicates that the State Reporting System computes a score of A, B, C, D, or F for this area. These are categories 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11, and 15 as listed below. The school systems included here have received ratings of "A" in at least 3 of these categories and no ratings of "F" in any of these categories

1. Stanford Achievement Test Total Battery By Grade (percentile)
2. Stanford Achievement Test Average Battery (Grades 3-11) *
3. Stanford Achievement Test Improvement Academic Achievement % Change
4. Achievement/Ability Comparison*
5. High School Exit Exam * (percent passing as 11th and 12th graders)
6. Writing Tests * (narrative, descriptive, expository, persuasive)
7. ACT Test Scores * (compared to state and national average)
8. Enrollment (number of students)
9. Average Daily Attendance (percent)
10. Projected 4-Year Dropout Rate * (percent compared to national and state)
11. System Current Expenditures Per Child in ADA * ($ compared to national,southeast, and state)
12. System Free/Reduced Lunch Eligibility (percent)
13. Professional Certification (percent)
14. System Average Total Revenues
15. Mills Equivalent *
16. System Yield Per Mill Per Child (state rank)

Grading Definitions for Overall Student Achievement by District for the 1996 Report Card

A	Superior	Percentile rank of 70 or above
A-	Excellent	66 to 69
B+	Outstanding	62-65
B	Very Good	58-61
B-	Good	54-57
C+	High Average	48-53
C	Average	40-47
C-	Moderate Caution	35-39
D+	Caution	31-34
D	Caution	27-30
D-	Extreme Caution	23-26
F	Failing	22 and below

Table 3
Demographic profile 1998-1999

	No. of schools	No of students	Per capita income	Supr	%F/R 1998	% White	Special initiatives (ie, class size, PTR, etc)
Athens City	7	2981	18,526	A M*	28%	72	yes
Auburn City	9	4285	17,236	A M*	29%	61	yes
Enterprise City	10	5241	19,368	A M*	36%	68	yes
Florence City	8	4589	19,336	A M*	44%	63	yes
Hartselle City	5	3027	21,876	A M*	18%	93	yes
Homewood City	5	3292	25,155	A	15%	75	yes
Hoover City	12	9353	25,155	A M*	6%	89	yes
Jasper City	5	2497	18,797	A M*	29%	78	yes
Mountain Brook	6	3856	25,155	A M*	0%	99	yes
Muscle Shoals	6	2198	19,782	A M*	16%	85	yes
Sheffield City	4	1449	19,782	A M*	63%	59	yes
Tuscumbia City	4	1460	19,782	A M*	42%	70	yes
Vestavia Hills	6	4305	25,155	A M*	3%	91	yes

Superintendent: E = Elected, A = Appointed. M = Male, F = Female
Per capita income = city if available, otherwise county
PTR - Pupil teacher ratio

Figure 2
Location of High Performing School Systems

Legend:

1. Athens City (Limestone)
2. Auburn City (Lee)
3. Enterprise City (Coffee)
4. Florence City(Lauderdale)
5. Hartselle City (Morgan)
6. Homewood City (Jefferson)
7. Hoover City(Jefferson)
8. Jasper City (Walker)
9. Mountain Brook(Jefferson)
10. Muscle Shoals (Colbert)
11. Sheffield City (Colbert)
12. Tuscumbia City (Colbert)
13. Vestavia City (Jefferson)

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Bibliography

Alabama State Department of Education. (1999). Alabama State Superintendent's report card. Montgomery, AL: Author.

Cornett, L. M., and Gaines, G. (1997). Accountability in the 1990's: Holding schools responsible for student achievement. Report of the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB). (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 406 739)

Council of Chief State School Officers. (1996). State education accountability reports and indicator reports: Status of reports across the states. Washington, D.C.: State Education Assessment Center.

County profiles: Alabama vital events. (1997). Vol 4. Alabama Department of Public Health Center for Health Statistics. Montgomery: author.

Jerry, L. J., and Ballator, N. (1999). NAEP 1998 Writing State Report for Alabama. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 433 509)

Mathews, J. G., and Hackett, E. R. (1997). The Alabama Superintendent's Report Card: An analysis of Local Education Agency characteristics and success at meeting state defined performance measures. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association, Memphis, TN, 1997. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 412 254)

McLean, J. E., Snyder, S. W., and Lawrence, F. R. (1998). A school accountability model. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association, New Orleans, 1998. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 428 440)

McLean, J. E., Snyder, S. W., Abbott, G., Reid, Brian, Ernest, J., and Heath, R. (1997). Evaluation of the Alabama Direct Assessment of Writing program. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 411 519)

Overcoming barriers to school reform in the Southeast. Revised. (1994). Report of the Southeastern Regional Vision for Education (SERVE). (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 377 573)

Remington, W. C. (Ed.). (2000). The atlas of Alabama counties. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama.